

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS
ROSEMARY DICARLO BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY
COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

21 January 2020

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today amid heightened regional tensions that threaten to destabilize further an already volatile political and security environment. The Secretary-General has been clear in calling on all leaders to exercise maximum restraint and has emphasized that the world cannot afford another conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not immune to the tensions in the region. At the same time, the effects of its persistence are felt far beyond Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The United Nations has consistently stated that we cannot hope to bring sustainable peace to the Middle East without taking firm action to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and achieve a two-State solution based on international law, relevant United Nations resolutions and prior agreements.

It is sadly not a surprise that a recent survey of millennials by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) found that almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of Israeli millennials thought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would “never end”, making them the least optimistic of the people surveyed in countries affected by war. Palestinians were also pessimistic, although slightly less so, with 52 per cent believing that the conflict would never end.

The international community bears a responsibility to help build a different future for these young Israelis and Palestinians, one that promises hope, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence rather than perpetual occupation and conflict.

Mr. President,

During the past few weeks, the UN has continued its engagement with all Palestinian factions to stress the need for and the prospect of holding long-overdue legislative and presidential elections.

Political parties have confirmed they would include more women candidates than the law requires. Discussions also continue regarding potentially amending the electoral law and raising the quota of women candidates on a list from 20 to 30 per cent.

Despite broad internal political agreement and a series of compromises by all factions, to date President Abbas has not issued the decree needed to schedule elections. In the past month, he has stated that he would not set dates until Israel agrees that elections can take place in East Jerusalem. Plans to organize the vote are now grinding to a halt.

The Secretary-General and the Special Coordinator remain hopeful that elections will be scheduled soon in line with previous practice.

Mr. President,

With the political process deadlocked, negative developments continue to undermine the prospects for a two-State solution.

The beginning of 2020 witnessed the continued expansion of settlement activity and the threat of annexation of parts of the West Bank. On 4 and 5 January, Israeli authorities advanced plans for some 1,900 residential units in settlements in Area C. The plans include the retroactive “regularization”, under Israeli law, of an outpost and advancement of plans in two other locations that were regularized in 2019. In addition, tenders were announced for some 2200 units in Area C and East Jerusalem.

On 5 January, an inter-ministerial committee tasked with discussing annexation plans for the Jordan Valley held its first meeting.

On 9 January, the Office of the Minister of Defence announced the appointment of the director of a new task force to tackle so-called “illegal Palestinian construction” in Area C of the West Bank.

Also in January, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced a new 150-unit compound to be built in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina, on land owned jointly by Israelis and Palestinians. The construction rights are expected to be split between the Israeli and Palestinian owners of the land, though the Palestinian owners had previously submitted objections to this plan.

On 15 January, following a ruling by Israel’s High Court of Justice, Israeli authorities demolished two houses in the outpost of Kumi Ori, in Area B of the West Bank.

Also, on 15 January Israel's Defense Ministry announced it was advancing the declaration of 7 new nature reserves in Area C and the expansion of twelve existing ones. If implemented, these declarations would be the first of their kind since the start of the Oslo process.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain an obstacle to peace. The annexation of some or all of Area C, if implemented, would deal a devastating blow to the potential of reviving negotiations, advancing regional peace, and the essence of the two-State solution.

Mr. President,

Meanwhile, sporadic violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza continued throughout the reporting period. Some 220 Palestinians, including 80 children, were injured in various incidents, including during clashes, protests, search and arrest operations, and settler-related violence. Of these, 50 were injured by tear gas inhalation. In addition, 6 Israelis, including one child, were injured during the reporting period.

Developments in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Al-Issawiya are a significant and growing concern. The area continues to be the focal point of ongoing clashes and numerous arrests, including of minors. The United Nations continues to monitor the situation closely.

In Gaza, while the situation remains extremely fragile, there has been a notable and welcome reduction in violence in and around Gaza as the understandings brokered by the United Nations and Egypt continue to be broadly upheld.

On 26 December, the organizers of the ongoing protests along the Gaza perimeter fence announced that the weekly demonstrations would be on hold until the end of March. Following the announcement, a relative calm has prevailed along the fence.

The limited demonstrations that took place prior to the announcement remained relatively peaceful, though some protesters engaged in violent activities including approaching the fence and throwing Molotov cocktails and explosive devices towards Israeli forces. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded with riot dispersal means and live fire, injuring some 140 Palestinians, including some 75 women and children. According to OCHA, the number of injuries recorded during the Gaza protests in the reporting period was the lowest since the protests began in March 2018. One Palestinian died of injuries sustained during a protest in May 2018.

It is concerning and regrettable, however, that in the last few days there has been a resurgence of incendiary balloons and kites launched from Gaza towards Israel. These actions are a risk to the civilian population.

During the reporting period, Palestinian militants fired some 20 projectiles from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli communities, a significant decrease compared to previous months. The rockets fell short, fell in open areas or were intercepted and did not cause any damage or injuries. In response to the rocket attacks, the IDF conducted several strikes against what it said were Hamas targets in Gaza. No injuries were reported.

ASG Muller will elaborate in further details on the humanitarian situation in the occupied territory.

Mr. President,

Despite ongoing efforts, the socio-economic situation in Gaza remains very difficult. Progress was made during the reporting period on implementation of the package of urgent humanitarian and economic interventions for Gaza, endorsed by the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) in September 2018. I take this opportunity to thank those in the international community who have contributed to the implementation of the AHLC plan and call on all to increase their support to UN programmes on the ground.

By the end of 2019, 37,000 temporary jobs had been created by UNRWA, UNDP and the World Bank. The cash-for-work programmes specifically target women and youth, as they are underrepresented in the labor force and require specialized assistance to gain access to employment opportunities. Several thousand more jobs are expected to be created this year.

The increased funding would allow UN agencies the capacity to significantly scale up and improve these job opportunities, as well as implement other programmes to support the economy and address unemployment more long term. Qatari funded fuel supplies for the Gaza Power Plant also continued, allowing for increased and more stable electricity supplies in Gaza.

Meanwhile, many of the AHLC projects remain unfunded or in a deficit. Critical health interventions identified in the package are still in deficit of USD 4 million. Donors are encouraged to continue their support of these interventions to alleviate the suffering of the population and help avoid another deadly escalation.

Despite the welcome progress in advancing these projects, it's a fact that humanitarian and economic steps alone will not resolve Gaza's immense challenges. At their core, Gaza's problems are political, and they require political solutions. Palestinian leaders must take concrete steps to ensure that Gaza and the West Bank are reunited. At the same time, Israel must significantly improve the movement and access of goods and people to and from Gaza, as a step towards the full lifting of the closures, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

Mr. President,

In other developments during the reporting period, on 20 December, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court released a statement, announcing that the ICC's preliminary examination into the Situation in Palestine "has concluded with the determination that all the statutory criteria under the Rome Statute for the opening of an investigation have been met." In doing so, she expressed her view that, among other things,

“war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.”

She also stated her position that the Court’s jurisdiction applies to the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Mr. President,

In line with legislation passed in the Knesset in July 2018, on 29 December, the Government decided to withhold USD 43 million in clearance revenues that Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, in monthly instalments spread over the course of 2020. The amount was determined by Israeli authorities to be equal to what Palestinian authorities paid Palestinians injured in attacks against Israelis and families of those killed in such attacks. This deduction comes in addition to USD 139 million already withheld by Israel over stipends paid in 2018 to prisoners convicted or accused of security offenses against Israel.

I am concerned that this development may strain the tenuous progress made in October 2019, when Israel and the Palestinian Authority reached a partial agreement on transferring clearance revenues. I reiterate my call to both sides to engage in a constructive manner to ensure compliance with the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations. The UN stands ready to assist in this process.

Mr. President,

Turning to the region, in Lebanon, efforts to form a Government have continued since Hassan Diab was nominated Prime Minister-designate on 19 December. The popular protests also continue, against the background of a deteriorating economic situation.

The violent incidents that took place in Beirut between protestors and security forces in recent days and incidents of disproportionate use of force raise very serious concern, particularly as the protests have been largely peaceful until now.

Following recent tensions in the region, the Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander encouraged parties to shield Lebanon from any potential spill-over and to urge for calm. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations, including along the Blue Line, remained stable.

While in the past weeks the situation on the Golan had generally remained clam, on 14 January, the Syrian Armed Forces issued a statement informing that the Israel Defense Forces had conducted an airstrike on targets located in Syria. UNDOF engaged both parties in order to prevent an escalation of tensions and reminded them of their obligation to respect the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

Mr. President,

In closing, I would like to emphasize the continued urgency of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

In the absence of progress towards an agreement that will resolve all final status issues, the United Nations continues to focus its efforts on establishing an environment conducive to the return to the negotiations. Recent regional events have once again brought to fore the crucial necessity of dialogue and diplomacy in the region.

And, we don't need to look any further to find living examples of dialogue and co-existence at the community level. Despite the political deadlock and tensions, Palestinians and Israelis on the ground continue to work every day to build a more peaceful and secure future.

From youth creating new platforms to increase cultural understanding across religious and national lines, to women demanding a greater role in their governments' decision-making, these remarkable individuals continue to serve as an inspiration to all of us to redouble our efforts towards a negotiated solution.

I assure you that the United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis as they pursue a peaceful and just future.

Thank you.